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PAUL FORT—BALLADES FRANÇAISES

BY J. K. ROOKER

For long in the history of French literature the *Académie Française* has stood for talent as opposed to genius. And if one class were looked upon askance by that august body, more than another, it was that to which the young poet belonged. A seat among the immortals on the Mount of Parnassus carried with it no seat, *ex officio*, in the *Académie Française*. So, some half a century ago it was determined that a "Prince of Poets" should be elected and chosen by his peers. The palm should be given to him who possessed what the *Académie* condemned—originality and genius. The first to receive this palm was Leconte de Lisle, then Paul Verlaine and Stephane Mallarmé; it is now held by Paul Fort, *poète français*.

Our object here will be to define, as far as we are able, the chief qualities of the poetry of M. Paul Fort.

The name of Paul Fort may still be unfamiliar to some Americans, even to those who dabble in French literature; and we must admit his works are unknown to great numbers of his own countrymen. Yet Paul Fort is a unique personality, exercising a considerable influence on the young poets of the present generation. The last of the *Cénacles*, which flourished in the days of the symbolists, is under his presidency—it was, indeed, at *La Causerie des Lilas*, held at a café in the Latin Quarter, that the writer first saw Paul Fort. His presence was one that could not easily be forgotten; the tall, straight figure, with the dark, shining eyes and jet-black hair plastered over the high tanned forehead, fixed itself on the mind.

Our poet was born at Rheims in 1872, and his name was familiar to literary circles before the age of twenty, as the founder of the "*Théâtre d'Art*" in opposition to the "*Théâtre Libre*," where the young naturalist writers of the

day performed their plays. Alone, possessing no influence, Paul Fort set about his task; he inspired actors to join him without any promise of pay, put up his own scenery, and gave to a select public for several years their first taste of Maeterlinck and the idealist writers of the time; also now and again less modern plays were staged, and it is interesting to note that Marlowe's "Faustus" and Shelley's "Cenci" figured in his programme. However, Paul Fort was not to remain long the manager of a theater, but as suddenly as he entered active life he left it, to retire and wander alone for three years over hill and plain. These years of silence were not unfruitful; they were immediately followed by the first publication of the first series of the "*Ballades Françaises*" (1897), which at once gave him an assured place among the poets of his day.

The "*Ballades Françaises*" have now mounted to the tenth series, and in fact almost all Monsieur Paul Fort's poetry has been published under that title.

There is a difficulty, and a serious one, which immediately confronts the critic—it is the universality of Paul Fort's appeal. Nothing seems foreign to his sympathy: he meets life at every point, and in his verse jots down his impressions. For often it is a mere jotting down; the poet catches an emotion or a thought on the wing, and retains but enough to give the same sense of something fleeting and transient. This is most noticeable, perhaps, in the second series, entitled "*Forêt-Plaine-Mer*," where nature under a thousand different aspects is for a moment portrayed in his verse.

Yet, however great the variety may be, however vagrant the poet's caprice, in all he writes is felt a subtle charm emanating from the man. This is an individual gift, which by no means every poet possesses, and often not even the greatest, but one, nevertheless, of the most pleasing of which a poet can boast. A quotation will make our meaning more clear:

Si toutes les filles du monde voulaient s'donner la main, tout autour
de la mer elles pourraient faire une ronde.

Si tous les gars du monde voulaient bien être marins, ils f'raient
avec leurs barques un joli pont sur l'onde.

Alors on pourrait faire une ronde autour du monde,
Si tous les gens du monde voulaient s'donner la main.

About poetry of this kind there is something infectious. It does not carry you away to heights of passion as does

greater poetry, yet you cannot escape it. The magnet is there, and the magnet draws. About much of the verse of Paul Fort there is this delicate attraction, this haunting simplicity.

At times, however, our poet rises to more majestic levels, and his greatest triumphs have been in the fusion of sincere sentiment and fantastic imagination.

Le ciel et les sommets sont la même patrie, et leurs voix, plus tragiques, s'épousent dans le soir, lorsque vers les étoiles l'aigle pousse un grand cri, que suit le bèlement plaintif des chèvres noirs.

On ne sait si les pics deviennent transparents, ou si le ciel y vient tourner ses pierreries: si les astres mirés tintent les torrents, ou si la voix des eaux rythme le flot des nuits.

Mais tu pourrais, poète,—si l'homme savait croire—élever en prière ton lyrisme hardi, ne voir en la montagne, offerte en bel espoir, qu'un échelon vers Dieu et vers son paradis,

dominer la montagne, et tu verrais, peut-être, sur la plus haute cime que tu aurais gravie, descendre des étoiles ou monter de ton être l'échelle de clarté qui mènerait vers Lui!

Oh! si tu savais croire, poète qui souris, ton émotion même te porterait à Lui, tu n'aurais d'horizon que celui de ton âme, et tes rêves au ciel mêleraient leurs montagnes. . . .

This power of combining intense emotion with great imaginative force marks the highest point, to our mind, that the poetry of Paul Fort reaches. The fancies of his mind seem to run wild picking at every flower whose gay and curious colors catch the eye, and he chooses the most curious and the gayest with which to wind his wreath of song. In his inspired moments he lives in a world of metaphor of astonishing variety and richness; and it is only the trembling sincerity of the verse which repudiates the suggestion that he has gone in search of his imagery definitely seeking the most unlikely and strangest he might meet upon his way. It is by drawing his inspiration from the elemental emotions of the human heart that he avoids artificiality. For three years he buried himself alone among the beauties of nature after all the activity of a life fully lived in Paris; from that close communion was born his book of ballads singing of the plains, the forests, and the sea. In the actual emotions which the poet experiences there is a certain simplicity; it is only in the imagery that we notice all the wealth of a Southern mind ready to catch every shade of color and tone. In the union of these two qualities the special charm and in-

terest of his poetry lies—it is simplicity of conception with Oriental abundance of metaphor.

The danger of this union is when the harmony fails, when the gaudy dress but clothes a poor and weak skeleton, when the initial conception lacks inspiration, and the poet in multi-colored garments would hide the place where the heart should beat and cover the motionless flesh. And we cannot deny that some of the work of Paul Fort is guilty of this mean device.

The sympathy of Paul Fort, we have said, is all-embracing. The whole of humanity seems to find entrance to his heart: from the town-dweller to the Bohemian of the Latin Quarter, from the provincial tradesman to the tiller of the soil. And, what is of more importance, this sympathy springs from inner knowledge, for he has lived with them all, watched their doings and followed them in the insignificant acts of daily life, and thus been enabled to see closer and more clearly than those that are content to look on from afar.

Indeed, one of the most characteristic traits of the work of Paul Fort is this universal sympathy toward humanity. He is stirred by the mere contact of human beings; he knows their joys and sorrows, and he sings of them in his verse. However, though he is not blind to the wild pleasure of simply existing, to all the beauty scattered through life, he sees with equal clearness the tragic side. Take, as an example, this delicate “Ballade au Hameau”:

Cette fille, elle est morte, est morte dans ses amours.

Ils l'ont portée en terre, en terre au point du jour.

Ils l'ont couchée toute seule, toute seule en ses atours.

Ils l'ont couchée toute seule, toute seule en son cercueil.

Ils sont rev'nus gaîment, gaîment avec le jour.

Ils ont chanté gaîment, gaîment: chacun son tour.

“ Cette fille, elle est morte, est morte dans ses amours.”

Ils sont allés aux champs, aux champs comme tous les jours. . . .

Many of Paul Fort's poems singing of the life of the peasant or the mountain shepherd are touched with a tinge of sadness. It is, however, his more strictly individualistic verse, where he boasts that to him *nihil humani alienum est*, which is the truest expression of his buoyant optimism. There he laughs with the rising dawn, and all that comes his way during the passing hours is inspiration

for the joyous music of his song. Yet in spite of this width of sympathy he rests essentially individual—he embraces all, but is never embraced by all. He stands and cries welcome to every breeze that blows upon him, but never does he for one moment forget that the center of the commotion is his own personality. His is the individualism of Walt Whitman, glorying in his own strength and stature, yet glorying, too, that he shares it with humanity as a whole. And, further, this great love for life, wherever it may be found, is for the poet the true way of letting rays of happiness fall across the darkened hearts of others.

Si tu sais méditer et voir, tout devient clair à ta bonté,
Mais si tu sais aimer la vie partout où tu la rencontres,
Tu sauras éclairer la nuit des âmes les plus profondes.

To extend this sympathy to all human beings, to know the careless laughter of the child, and not be ignorant of the tear wrung from the eyes of the man—this for Paul Fort is taking of the fullness of life and accepting the greatest wealth she has to offer.

J'ai le cœur enfant,—de quelle profondeur!
Qui donc le saurait? Je ne le sais moi-même.
Ce que je sais seul, j'aime celui qui m'aime.

Or again:

Mort! le vent pleure autour du monde. Vie! autour du monde
le vent rit,—Aimons-nous vite, aimons-nous tous, dépêchons-nous,
le vent nous pousse.

If we pass to the nature poems, which are profusely scattered through his works, we notice the same universal sympathy extended to the material world. The volume of *Ballades* entitled "*Forêt-Plaine-Mer*" contains the largest number of these poems. They render, perhaps too obviously, the idea of a series of impressions where just enough effort has been given to catch the last glimpse of a fleeting emotion. The sketching note-book is too palpable; and in consequence the volume lacks depth of feeling.

Quelle douce mer, le vent et l'air bleu. O l'écume bleue des vagues
de l'air, à la nuque, aux tempes, au front de la montagne, noyée
jusqu'aux yeux.

This verse of pure description, charming as it is in itself, loses that charm in constant repetition; and when poem after poem is little more than a series of images, a chaplet of passing emotions stirred by the breeze playing across the face, we are conscious of a certain insufficiency.

However, we would not suggest that this is all that the nature poetry of Paul Fort can give; but we cannot leave these purely descriptive poems without noticing the strength and beauty of his picture, when now and again with a sure hand he paints the vision which rises before his eyes:

L'impression est grave et l'âme se recueille lorsqu'on voit au lointain la plaine chargée d'arbres lever, comme en un coup de vent, sa large vague jusqu'au ciel, où s'égare l'écume bleue des feuilles.

Or notice the delicate charm of this hymn sounding the advent of spring:

Lorsqu'au premier soleil la terre frémissante a vu ses germes s'élever vers le jour, et que tous ses sommets ont senti sur leurs pentes l'herbe les caresser de ses mains de velours,

les clochettes ont ravi le réveil des villages blottis sous les vapeurs tremblantes des vallées, les troupeaux ont blanchi l'air bleu de la montagne et les souhaits des clochers ont suivi les bergers.

Le vent chargé d'aurore a balayé les brumes et le soleil, aux lèvres, a doré les pipeaux. Le jour a descendu blancs torrents qui fument, quand les troupeaux montaient vers un azur nouveau.

Sous les glaciers jetant leur sources violettes, la montagne semblait couverte de rubans, et le son des pipeaux et le bruit des clochettes faisaient de la montagne le hochet du printemps.

Yet if the greater bulk of Paul Fort's nature poetry is descriptive, the more important never loses touch with the soul of man, for his moods are in harmony with the moods of nature, who responds, as only nature can, to the cry of the human voice trembling with joy or pain. There is a unity which binds the whole, and the same rhythmic laws govern the life of both:

La cerise commence à rougir, mon cœur à n'avoir plus de peine, et les lavandières à rire le long l'Oise et de la Seine.

Nature to the poet is essentially alive; the universal spirit is imminent and penetrates her whole being:

Des lointains la montagne était un doux visage, la roseur des villages accentuait ses plis, et son vivant sourire et son vivant langage étaient l'œuvre de Dieu et des hommes unis.

So approaching the mountain slopes decked in the first glory of spring, he feels well up within his breast a kindred sympathy:

Quand je m'approchai d'elle, ce fut une prière qui monta de mon cœur vers ce rêve divin, et pardonnant au ciel les haines de l'hiver, j'allai tremper mon cœur aux sources du matin.

The attitude of Paul Fort toward the natural world is not simple pantheism; his conception is that of the human soul mingling with nature, and then together rising toward the Soul of All. God is the magnet which attracts everything to Himself. Nature and Man in one chant of joy mount to lose themselves in the Infinite. The spirit of God and of the Universe do not of necessity form one spirit, but that unity is the natural desire of man and the material world. It is here Paul Fort differs from the pantheist. Now there is separation, then will there be union:

Les parfums, le zephyr, les cloches et les chants enveloppaient
mon âme et la portaient à Dieu!

This sense of kinship with nature is felt in the constant harmony of which our poet sings as existing between man and natural phenomena. With the wind he races along the mountain ridge; he lies on a bed of autumn leaves in the forest and hears the trees murmuring their dirge; he glides into the clear, cool water of the stream and listens to its babbling song. So Nature in his verse is personified, and the poet draws frequent analogies between her moods and the joys and sorrows of men; or he takes some scene, as that of the death of a stag, and makes it symbolize in his poem the agony of a broken heart:

Mon cœur est désespéré—Mes amis chasseurs,
Voyez le cerf déchiré.

Avant de mourir je meurs—Vite à la curée
L'œil du cerf se voile et pleure.

Nature for him is no implacable goddess, as for Alfred de Vigny, for example, who follows her destined course indifferent to the cry of humanity. She is not soulless, but soulful; and it is on her breast that man most willingly should lay his head; it is holding her hand that he should sing upon the mountain top; and lastly it is with her he should rise to merge himself in the spirit of God.

The technique of M. Paul Fort's poetry possesses one or two marked differences to that of his predecessors. It is printed in the form of prose, though being for the most part composed in the ordinary alexandrine of twelve feet. He uses, with general accuracy, the median cæsura, and his rhymes are often rich, though constantly he is content with a simple assonance, and also from time to time writes in blank verse.

These various meters come directly from the popular songs of the countryside, where indeed our poet sought his inspiration. It is the music of the folk-songs that he has so skilfully used in his verse. The style is new to modern poetry, and to Paul Fort must remain the honor of giving to it an established place. If some such attempts had already been made by M. Mendès, for example, in his *Lieder*, or by M. Péladan in the *Queste du Graal*, nevertheless our poet by the infinite variety of which he has shown it is capable, by the great importance it possesses in his own work, and by the theoretical value he attaches to it, has made this style above all his own, and with it his name will always be remembered.¹

We will limit ourselves to but one quotation. It is the dedication to his first volume of ballads:

Ton regard est plus doux d'avoir été voilé quand tu souris d'avoir pleuré,
et plus doux ton sourire de s'être dévoilé quand ma peine et ton âme ont dû se rencontrer.

Sur mon visage en larmes a passé ton sourire, chère âme, et j'ai chanté
de toute la gaieté naïve de ton sourire, dans toute la douceur de ma simplicité.

This system of meter lends itself with wonderful ease to every change in the poet's thought and feeling; and in the verse of Paul Fort the rhythm of the music is always in close harmony with the motif of the poem. From the chanting verse of careless gaiety to the long-drawn wail of bitter agony the poet moves with grace and power. However, where the bulk is great, as the ten volumes of ballads testify, there must be verse at times which seems crude and harsh, and indeed this effect, in the poetry of Paul Fort, is intensified by the strangeness of his imagery and the occasional brutal realism of his thought. Yet as a whole the reader delights over the variety and harmony of the verse which fills these volumes.

We have attempted to sketch the main characteristics of M. Paul Fort's work, to point out those traits of sympathy which distinguish his verse, a sympathy which he extends to all persons and things that cross his way. We have in-

¹ Vid., Introduction by M. Pierre Louÿs to "*Ballades Françaises*," Série 10.

sisted on that kindred human feeling that is predominant in his temperament and which enables him to enter every heart. We have shown, too, the close union which our poet realizes with Nature, how she is for him a living soul ever ready to respond to the soul of man, and that their ideal is a common one; to rise together, mingling one with the other, and finally rest in the infinite soul of God.

And it will not be useless repetition to emphasize again the variety of thought and feeling which is seen in his poetry; there is, indeed, expressed a wealth of sympathy with man and the material world that is unique in modern verse; though perhaps this diffusion of sentiment is of necessity weaker and less intense than more concentrated passion.

Lastly, the rhythmic prose with the irregular rhymes, in which form the "*Ballades Françaises*" are written, claim for Paul Fort the merit of introducing a new style into French literature. Here again the astonishing variety of modulation and tone, the sinuous grace of the strophes, and the harmony realized between the thought and the expression is that which strikes the reader most keenly.

In this poetry we hear all—from the "wailful sweetness of the violin" to the gay song of the flutes and reed pipes.

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